



The Mauryan empire collapsed about 2200 years ago. In its place (and elsewhere) rose several new kingdoms. Pushyamitra Sunga founded the Sunga dynasty after defeating the last Mauryan ruler Brihadratha. He ruled over the north and parts of central India. The Sungas ruled for about 112 years and followed by another dynasty, known as the Kanvas and by rulers from other families till the establishment of the Gupta empire about 1700 years ago.

In the north-west and in parts of north India, kings known as the Indo-Greeks ruled for about one hundred years (2200 to 2100 years ago). They were followed by central Asian people, Shakas, who set up kingdoms in the north-west, north and western India. At some places Kushanas took over from the Shakas (about 2000 years ago). Part of Shaka kingdom lasted for about 500 years till the Shakas were defeated by the Gupta kings (1700 years ago).

The sources for Gupta period are varied. The *Prayaga Prashasti* of Samudragupta at Allahabad gives us valued information about his conquests. The paintings of Ajanta and large number of coins issued by the Gupta rulers also tells us about life in the Gupta period. Literary sources include the works of the famous poet Kalidas and the accounts of foreign travellers such as Fa Xian.

The famous rulers of the Gupta dynasty were Chandragupta I, Samudragupta and Chandragupta II.

Samudragupta's Prashasti

We know about Samudragupta from a **long inscription**, actually a poem in Sanskrit, composed by his court poet, **Harishena** nearly 1700 years ago. This long inscription is called prashasti (a Sanskrit word), meaning 'in praise of'. Samudragupta's prashasti was inscribed on Allahabad Pillar which was actually erected by Ashoka. This prashasti is in Sanskrit and runs into 30 lines. Harishena praised the king immensely and extraordinarily. He wrote that the king was **warrior, winner, learned man and the best of poets**. He described the king even equal to the gods.

Samudragupta, the Warrior

"His most charming body was covered with the plenteous beauty of the marks of hundreds of wound marks caused by battle-axes, arrows, spears, swords. and many other weapons."

The historians have made a map from the information given in the *prashasti*. Harishena describes Samudragupta's policies towards four different kinds of rulers :

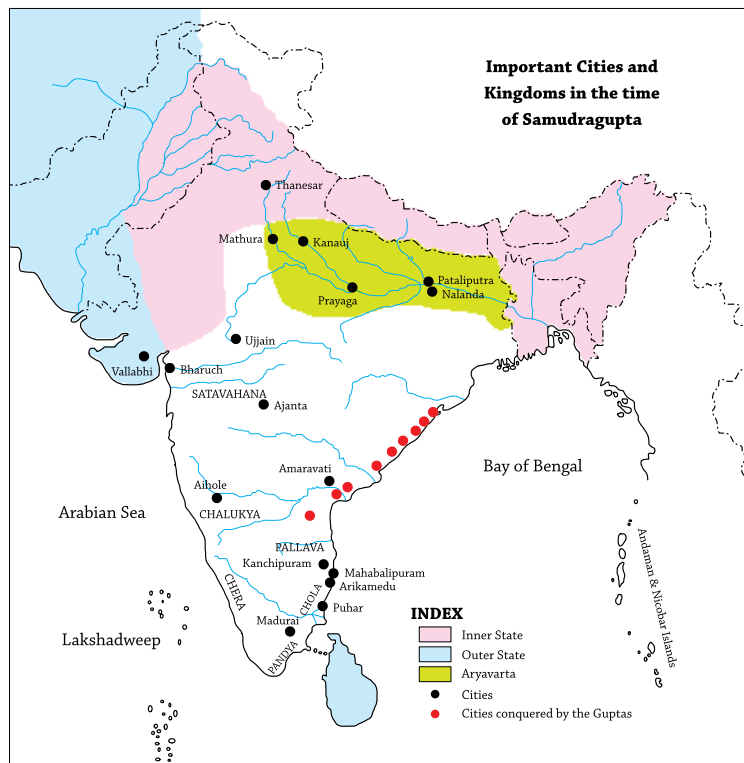
1. There were nine rulers of *Aryavarta* (western Gangetic plain) who were conquered by Samudragupta and their kingdoms were made a part of his empire.
2. In the *Dakshinapatha*, there were twelve rulers. After defeating them Samudragupta allowed them to rule again and was paid tributes by them.
3. The inner circle of neighbouring states, including Assam, coastal Bengal, Nepal and number of *gana sanghas* in the north-west brought tribute, followed his orders and attended his court.
4. The rulers of the outer states in the northwest were mostly the descendents of Kushanas and Shakas. They and the ruler of Sri Lanka submitted to Samudragupta and offered daughters in marriage.

Some other qualities of Samudragupta are shown on coins. He is shown sitting on a high backed chair with a Veena in his hand. He wrote poetry and was very fond of music. He also held discussions with scholars.

The Gupta Dynasty

Most *Prashastis* also mention the line of descent of the ruler traced from an ancestor. The Prayag Prashasti mentions Samudragupta's great grandfather, grandfather, father and mother. His mother, Kumara Devi belonged to the Lichchhavi *gana*. His father was Chandragupta I who extended his empire to Prayaga (present-day Allahabad) and adopted the grand title of *maharaj-adhiraja* meaning the king of big kings. **Sumudragupta** also adopted this title. The *prashasti* mentions his great grandfather and grandfather simply as *maharajas*. It shows that the rule of the dynasty gradually extended.

Samudragupta's second son **Chandragupta II** succeeded him. We know about him from inscriptions and coins. His first expedition led to the conquest of west India (Malwa, Gujarat and Saurashtra) where





A coin of Samudragupta (both sides shown)

he overcame the last of the Shakas. Then the trade carried on through the ports of western India such as Bharuch, Cambay and Sopara could be controlled by the Guptas. He also conquered the Bengal (Vang) chiefdoms. This extended his control from coast-to-coast. He established a **second (trading) capital at Ujjain**.

Chandragupta II took the title of **Vikramaditya** meaning 'Sun of Power'. He took this title after driving Shakas out of Ujjain. On their part Shakas regarded him as '**Shakari**', the enemy of Shakas. Despite many wars his reign is remembered for achievements in literature, culture, art and science. According to later belief, his court was full of learned people, including Kalidasa, the poet, and Aryabhata, the astronomer.

Pataliputra, Prayaga and Ujjain were important centres of the Gupta rulers.

Harshavardhana and the Harshacharita


Inscriptions and coins are important sources of information. Besides them, biographies and travel accounts of pilgrims can also be important sources of information. **Banabhatta**, the court poet of the king Harshavardhana wrote his biography 1400 years ago. This biography named **Harshacharita** is written in Sanskrit. The Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang visited India during the reign of Harshavardhana. He spent many years in the court of Harsha. He wrote a detailed account of what he saw.

Harsha became the king of Thanesar after both his father and elder brother died. His sister was married to the ruler of Kanauj which was a trade centre. Many rulers wanted to conquer Kanauj. The ruler of Bengal killed the brother-in-law of Harsha to conquer Kanauj. Harsha took over the kingdom of Kanauj and then led an army against the ruler of Bengal. He conquered Magadha in the way and then Bengal. Then he established a strong empire which extended from Punjab, Kashmir and Nepal in the North to the river Narmada in the South. He tried to cross the Narmada to march into the Deccan, but was stopped by a ruler belonging to the Chalukya dynasty, Pulakeshin II.

Harsha ruled from his capital at **Kanauj**. It was located in the rich agricultural region of the western Gangetic plain. It was also a cultural centre. Harsha was a popular ruler. He patronised Buddhism and built innumerable stupas, established many monasteries and founded several state hospitals. He organised the 5th Buddhist assembly at Kanauj. He also worshipped Shiva and the Sun god.

The Pallavas and Chalukyas

In South India, the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas ruled mainly between 2200 and 1800 years ago. And, about 1500 years ago, there were two large kingdoms, those of the Pallavas and the Chalukyas. There were



several other kingdoms and kings as well. We know about them from their coins and inscriptions as well as from books. The Pallavas and Chalukyas frequently raided one another's prosperous towns.

The kingdom of the Pallavas spread from the region around their capital, **Kanchipuram**, to the Kaveri delta. Kingdom of the Chalukyas was centred around the Raichur Doab, between the rivers Krishna and Tungabhadra. **Aihole** was the capital of the Chalukyas. It was an important trading centre and a religious centre with a number of temples. The best-known Chalukya ruler was **Pulakeshin II**.

Pulakeshin's Prashasti

Ravikirti, the court poet of Pulakeshin II composed a prashasti of him. This tells us about his ancestors of four generations. Pulakeshin II got the kingdom from his uncle. He led expeditions along both the west and the east coasts. Besides he checked the advance of Harsha. In the words of Ravikirti :

'After this defeat, Harsha was no longer Harsha (happiness). Pulakeshin II also attacked the Pallava king, who took shelter behind the walls of Kanchipuram.'

Pulakeshin II extended the Chalukyan empire upto Konkan, Goa and Malwa. He defeated the first important Pallava king Mahendravarman but was later defeated by his son Narasimhavarman. Ultimately, both the Pallavas and the Chalukyas gave way to new rulers of the Rashtrakuta and Chola dynasties.

Administration of the New Empires

The village was the basic unit of administration and land revenue (tax on farmers) was the chief source of income. The empire was divided into provinces (*desha, rashtra or bhukti*). The princes were appointed as Viceroys of the provinces. They took the title of *Uparika Maharaja* in Gupta empire. Each province was divided into a number of districts (*pradesha or vishaya*). Each district had its own administrative officer (*Ayuktak or Vishayapati*). Each village was headed by a *Gramika*. He was assisted by a council of elders. Some important posts were hereditary, i.e., sons succeeded fathers to these posts. For example, the poet Harishena in the court of Samudragupta was a *maha-danda-nayaka* (chief judicial officer), like his father. One person could hold many offices, for example, Harishena was not only a *Maha-danda-nayaka* but also a *Kumara-amatya* (important minister) and a *Sandhi-vigrahika* (a minister of war and peace).

Besides, important men who were powerful, either economically or socially, had a say in **local administration**. These included the *nagara-shreshthi* (chief banker or merchant of the city), the *sarthavaha* (leader of the merchant caravans), the *parthama kulika* (chief craftsman), and the *kayasthas* (head of the scribes).

Some of these men grew more powerful over time and set up independent kingdoms.



A New Kind of Army

The kings maintained a well-organised regular army. It consisted of infantry (foot soldiers), cavalry (horse riders), chariots and elephants. The soldiers and officers had their ranks and were paid a regular salary. Besides, there were *samantas* (military leaders) who provided the king with troops in time of need. These samantas were not paid regular salaries. They were given lands to collect revenue from them. They used this revenue to maintain soldiers and horses and to provide weapons and other equipments. Gradually, these samantas became strong and established independent kingdoms whenever they saw that the ruler was weak.

Local Assemblies in the Southern Kingdoms

Pallavas introduced an efficient system of administration starting from the village level. The local assembly of *brahmin* land owners was called a *sabha*. This assembly or village council functioned through sub-committees. Each subcommittee looked after a special task like irrigation, making roads, local temples or other affairs. The local assembly of a village where the land owners were not *brahmins* was called an *ur*. In the towns, the *nagaram* was an organisation of merchants. There were other local assemblies depending upon the population of the village or the town. They continued to function hundreds of years.

The Life of Ordinary People

There were no major social conflicts as most people respected the ruler and his officials out of fear or poverty. The most famous Sanskrit writer of this period, **Kalidasa** depicts in his plays the life of the people and life in the king's court. In his plays the king and most brahmins are shown as speaking **Sanskrit** while other people use **Prakrit**. We find an interesting description of the trouble of a poor fisherman in his play *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*.

Plight of the Poor

The King Dushyanta loved Shakuntala, a young woman. He gave his ring to Shakuntala for recognition. Accidentally the ring fell in water and a fish swallowed it. By chance a fisherman caught that fish and found the ring inside while cutting it. He recognized the seal of the king and went to the king's court to give it to the king. The gateman accused him of theft and the chief police officer behaved rudely. However, the king rewarded the fisherman for the ring. Then, the police officer and the gateman went along the fisherman to take a share of the reward.

The Chinese pilgrim **Fa Xian** wrote that most people were honest and lived very simple lives. The rich lived in big houses made of bricks and the poor lived in thatched houses made of mud.

And, **Banabhatta** writer of Harshacharita, gives a clear account of the plight of the common people when the kings travelled.

The King's Army On the Move

The king's army moved with weapons, items of daily use such as pots, pans, furniture and food material. The army was accompanied by musicians beating drums and others playing horns and trumpets.

Often, the elephants trampled down the huts of villages. The oxen yoked to the caravans of merchants ran away, scared by the tumult. The villagers had to provide every thing along the way. They came with gifts of curds, gur and flowers and provided fodder for the animals of the army.

In Other Parts of The World

Around 1400 years ago, Prophet Muhammad introduced a new religion, Islam, in Arabia. It stressed on the equality of all before Allah, the one supreme God. He appealed for charity, fast, chastity and patience. Later he conquered Mecca. His successors were known as Caliphs. Within a hundred years Islam spread to north Africa, Spain, Iraq, Iran and India. Arab merchants and sailors brought the new religion with them.



Key Words

- » Prashasti : an inscription in praise of someone.
- » Aryavarta : area of western Gangetic plain, occupied by the Aryans.
- » Dakshinapatha : area of south India, especially the Deccan.
- » Hereditary : rank or property passed from father to son.
- » Veena : a stringed musical instrument.
- » Assembly : a group of people gathered together.
- » Biography : an account of a person's life written by someone else.
- » Samanta : unsalaried military leader, given land for revenue.
- » Nagaram : an organisation of merchants.

Time Line

- ◆ Beginning of the Gupta dynasty (about 1700 years ago)
- ◆ The rule of Harshavardhana (about 1400 years ago)

SUMMARY

- ▶ Prayaga Prashasti of Samudragupta is a long inscription found on an Ashoka Pillar at Allahabad.
- ▶ Harishena, the court poet, describes Samudragupta as a warrior, winner, learned man and the best of poets.
- ▶ Samudragupta's policies were different towards four different kinds of rulers of : Aryavarta, Dakshinapatha, inner states, outer states.
- ▶ Chandragupta I and Samudragupta took the title of maharaja-adhiraja and Chandragupta II took title of Vikramaditya.
- ▶ Banabhatta, the court poet of the king Harshavardhana wrote his biography.
- ▶ The Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang spent many years in the court of Harsha. He wrote a detailed account of what he saw.

- ▶ Harsha's empire extended from Punjab, Kashmir and Nepal in the North to the river Narmada in the South.
- ▶ The kingdom of the Pallavas spread from the region around their capital, Kanchipuram, to the Kaveri delta.
- ▶ Kingdom of the Chalukyas was centred around the Raichur Doab, between the rivers Krishna and Tungabhadra.
- ▶ Pulkeshin II extended the Chalukyan empire upto Konkan, Goa and Malwa.
- ▶ The new emperors made many posts hereditary, took support of the persons economically or socially powerful or having military strength.
- ▶ Local assemblies in the Southern kingdoms worked at the level of villages and towns.
- ▶ The society was divided into rich and poor, high and low castes.

Exercise Time

A. Tick (✓) the only correct choice amongst the following :

1. Harishena composed a Prashasti in praise of :
 a. Gautamiputra b. Samudragupta c. Harshavardhana d. Pulkeshin II
2. The capital of the Pallavas was :
 a. Aihole b. Kanchipuram c. Pataliputra d. Ujjain
3. Chandragupta I took the title of :
 a. Vikramaditya b. Maharaja c. Maharaj-adhiraj d. Lord of Dakshinapath
4. Samudragupta used to play on :
 a. drum b. veena c. trumpet d. horn
5. The second capital of Chandragupta II was :
 a. Taxila b. Pataliputra c. Kanauj d. Ujjain

B. Fill in the blanks :


1. Allahabad pillar was erected by _____.
2. Samudragupta was very fond of _____.
3. Chinese pilgrim _____ visited India during the reign of Harshavardhana.
4. The ruler of _____ killed the brother-in-law of Harsha.
5. _____ was the capital of the Chalukyas.

C. Match the following :

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| 1. Prayaga | a. an organisation of merchants |
| 2. Sabha | b. Allahabad |
| 3. Nagaram | c. court poet of Samudragupta |
| 4. Harshacharita | d. local assembly of brahmin land owners |
| 5. Harishena | e. Banabhatta |

D. Write true (T) or False (F) against the following statements in given brackets :

1. The rulers of Aryavarta brought tribute for Samudragupta.
2. There were twelve rulers in Dakshinapatha.
3. Aihole was the capital of the Pallavas.

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4. Local assemblies functioned for hundreds of years in south India.
 5. Taxila and Madurai were important centres under the control of the Gupta rulers.

E. Define the terms :

1. Prashasti
2. Biography
3. Samanta
4. Nagaram

F. Answer in one word or one phrase :

1. Who was the most important king of Chalukyan empire ?
2. Which Chinese pilgrim visited Harsha's court ?
3. Who was the court poet of Samudragupta ?
4. Who wrote Harshacharita ?
5. Rulers of which states offered their daughters in marriage to Samudragupta ?

G. Answer these questions briefly :

1. What is a Prashasti ? How is it a source of history ?
2. How is Harshacharita a source of history ? Who wrote it ?
3. What are the sources of information for the Gupta period ?
4. What posts Harishena held in Samudragupta's court ?
5. What was the extension of the Pallava's kingdom and Chalukya's kingdom ?
6. What changes do you find in the army in the Gupta period ?
7. Write a short note on the 'Life of ordinary people' in Gupta period.
8. What did Fa Xian wrote about people ?

H. Answer these questions in detail :

1. What were the new administrative arrangement during Gupta period ?
2. How were the South Indian kingdoms administered ?
3. Describe how Samudragupta treated the rulers of the conquered territories differently ?
4. Describe the achievements of Chandragupta II ?
5. Describe the achievements of Harshavardhana.

PROJECT WORK

- How do the wars affect the lives of ordinary people today ? Write in terms of killings, supply of food, rates of consumables, pollution, mental tension, etc. Draw and sketch a poster.